

English Homework for Children Abroad



Thanks to the enterprise of a Victorian schoolmarm, the P.N.E.U. correspondence courses enable parents in remote corners of the world to give their children an English education

By DUDLEY BARKER

THE MASTER of a cargo vessel plying in the Far East wrote home to his wife in Scotland. His ship was going on Indonesian charter for a year, and the company said that he could take his family along. Would she be able to come with their two children?

"My main concern," she recalls, "was for the children's education. David had almost completed two years at primary school. Alison, our three-year-old daughter, would soon be ready to start kindergarten. I decided that the opportunity to reunite our family was too good to miss, and that I would have to teach

the children myself." So she enrolled for a correspondence course with the Parents' National Educational Union, collected the first-term lessons and books, and flew off with the children to join her husband's ship at Djakarta.

For the next three years David's lessons arrived by mail from England at the start of each term. With them came a separate envelope marked, "Open when term's work is completed." Twelve weeks later she took from it David's terminal exam questions, mailed his answers back to England for assessing, and in due course received his term's

report, signed by the P.N.E.U. Principal.

The children sailed round the world with their father, saw the Great Wall of China, Rangoon's Shwe Dagon pagoda, the Panama Canal, and the great suspension bridge across the Golden Gate at San Francisco. Every day, on a covered deck adjoining their father's cabin, their mother taught David (and later Alison) writing, reading, numbers, geography, history, even French, although she had no previous experience of teaching. The boy did well in his exams and, at ten, will return to normal school life in Scotland, somewhat ahead of his age group in several subjects.

P.N.E.U. is an independent, self-supporting and non-profit-making organization which conducts its correspondence school for the children of diplomats, missionaries, businessmen, soldiers and sailors scattered all over the world. Some 450 children, from five to 17 years, are at present studying English school subjects in 85 countries—in jungle bungalows, aboard ships, on coral reefs, at sheep stations and amid Arctic ice. The teachers are nearly always their mothers.

Three children of a winter-sports organizer living in an isolated chalet in the French Alps might reasonably have hoped that schooling could not catch up with them. But P.N.E.U. lessons arrive regularly with the ski supplies. They come just as regularly for a five-year-old

on a half-million-acre sheep farm adjoining the Straits of Magellan at the tip of South America; for a carpet-buyer's daughter in Hamadan, high in the mountains of Iran, who two years ago wrote home tearfully: "The wolves come down from the mountains to look for food. They ate one of our puppies."

A Nigerian diplomat in the Republic of Guinea enrolled his two sons so that, wherever he might be sent by his government, they could continue their education uninterrupted. The boys proudly wear the P.N.E.U. badge and tie, sent out from Harrods in London. As another P.N.E.U. member, the wife of a tea planter in Assam, said of her small daughter: "Caroline has never attended classes with other children, but she always wears the P.N.E.U. colours. They make her feel she is part of a worldwide school."

One reason why such families choose P.N.E.U. correspondence courses is that, when they return home, the children can step straight into an English school. A British oil man, who has lived in 25 different places in Burma, India and Pakistan since he married ten years ago, gets two months' home leave in Whitby, Yorkshire, each year. Abroad, his wife teaches their two daughters by P.N.E.U. On leave, the girls spend one full term at a Whitby primary school.

"The headmaster stopped me in town to say how well the girls had settled in," their mother told me.

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ENGLISH HOMEWORK FOR CHILDREN ABROAD

"Sally, the younger, is up to her age group in most subjects, and ahead in numbers, mental arithmetic and vocabulary."

The courses are also used in a number of affiliated schools, both at home and overseas. In Bonn, capital of West Germany, the lessons have grown into an international school. Four years ago a parent in the British Embassy begged P.N.E.U. to send out a teacher from England. The following year she arrived and set up her classes in a corner of a German school. Soon she found herself with more than 50 pupils and a waiting list; she had to get two other teachers to help.

The British Embassy School at Bonn is now probably the most international school in Europe. Its pupils include children from England, Canada, the United States, India, Pakistan, Thailand, Syria, Nigeria, Switzerland, Spain, Holland, Malaya, Japan, Kenya and Egypt. All work in English—in which, for instance, the Japanese girl is learning Latin.

The children get along without friction, but never lose pride in their own countries. When the headmistress mentioned that she did not know the flag of one pupil's country, the ambassador's son hauled it down from the front of his father's embassy and brought it along to school. The headmistress managed to get the flag re-hoisted before His Excellency found out.



Charlotte Mason, founder of the P.N.E.U.

The P.N.E.U. was founded in 1888 by a Victorian pioneer of education, Charlotte Mason, who had published a book about *Home Education* in an age when many middle-class children were taught at home. She established her "House of Education" at Ambleside in Westmorland and set out to train teachers in her educational philosophy; her first rule was that every child should be treated as a *person*.

Those lessons were meant for the governesses who, in Victorian England, brought up children who might one day become overseas administrators, governors and men of ideas. Baden-Powell once admitted that it was a P.N.E.U.-trained governess who first suggested to him the idea of Boy Scouts.

As governesses died out, more and more wives of men serving overseas took over the education of their children—usually until they

were old enough to go to boarding school — using P.N.E.U. work schedules. The mothers were delighted to discover how effectively they could learn to teach their own children — and how emotionally satisfying it was. "Besides," as one practical wife put it, "you learn so much yourself." One father reported back to headquarters: "Julian and his mother have worked very hard this term."

In 75 years, some 50,000 children have started their education with postal lessons from P.N.E.U.; for some, these courses have been their only schooling before university entrance. Thousands more have been educated at some 80 permanent P.N.E.U. schools. Many come from famous families; six of the eight bridesmaids at the Queen's wedding had studied the P.N.E.U. way.

Today P.N.E.U. headquarters is in a modern office building near Buckingham Palace. With three qualified teachers to help her, plus administrators and secretaries, the Principal, Jean Cochrane, supervises the correspondence courses and the work of the established schools. For assessing exam papers she calls on an outside panel of six examiners.

"Charlotte Mason died in 1923," explains Miss Cochrane, "but her principles live on. The staff is intentionally kept small because she believed so firmly in the personal approach. Apart from modern aids like calculating machines and filing systems, we like to feel that the

atmosphere is much the same as she created at Ambleside."

People who work in the world's trouble-spots soon discover the value of this dedicated educational effort. Just before the Congo rebels cut the postal route to a mission at Lulimba, the term's P.N.E.U. lessons arrived for the missionary's 13-year-old son. While rebel forces closed in, his mother took him through the secondary-school curriculum. The mission was in a state of siege for 129 days. A fortnight after Congo government forces broke through, the boy passed the entrance exam for a high school in Zambia.

P.N.E.U. plays an important part in Britain's task of aiding the development of new countries. Large business concerns as well as government agencies know that to get the best men out to remote places to build dams, irrigate deserts, develop mines, their families must accompany them. That means English education must go along too. As a result there are schools based on P.N.E.U. courses alongside the great dam project across the Niger river, by an oilfield on the coast of Ecuador, and a score more scattered through hot, bleak areas of the world.

Major projects of today, upon which the prosperity of nations will be built, depend not a little on the lessons which a Victorian schoolmistress thought up for governesses, and which now carry her schoolroom across the world.